

*Sustainable Development strategies: limitations and risks*

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National (and regional of any level) sustainable development strategies are impossible. Their invention is either self-deception or a swindle. The reasons for the impossibility are the initially established principles of sustainable development. They are not comparable with the principles of organization of economic, political and social life, which underlie the existence of modern so-called «developed countries». In a limited sense, only the concept of «movement towards sustainable development» is possible. Therefore, setting goals for creating «national and regional strategies for sustainable development» should be limited to developing only those strategic measures that are as consistent as possible with the principles declared in the global concepts of the movement towards sustainable development. The paper highlights and discusses (a) the conditions necessary for the implementation of the idea of sustainable development, (b) formal constraints and (c) risks, and (d) two possible alternative scenarios for the development of modern societies along the path of sustainable development.

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In recent years it has become popular in the academic community to elaborate various concepts of “sustainable development strategy”, while executives make attempts (mostly in words) to implement them in cities and regions [1, 2, 3]. Of course, all this is being done in the context of government policy, which declares such goals at the national level according to recommendations of UNCED (Rio-1992, Johannesburg-2002). It is though an example of how a reasonable idea gets a “new life” by efforts of many enthusiasts not willing or not able to think deeper, and takes direction very different from the one that was initially intended (e.g. [4, 5, 6, 7]). And this is the case with the idea of sustainable development. Those who have followed the history of introducing the idea since its “third rise” in Rio de Janeiro

know well that the principles and concept of sustainable development were formulated with a major reservation that a strategy of sustainable development to be created applies to the whole humanity and is an agenda for the global future [1, 4, 7].

However despite ‘The concept of Russia’s transition towards sustainable development’ (1996) that repeatedly points out at the global character of the process [1], and even despite the special paragraph in the Brundtland Report ten years earlier [4, pp. 24-26], very soon, in the late 1990s, the local ‘strategies’ started to appear in both academic and mass press, first at the regional and then even at the lower territorial level, even at city or district scale. All the developers of such “strategies” whether forgot or simply were not aware of the essential methodological reservation: the sustainable development is impossible at small scale, and only with certain limitations may be feasible at national level (see [1, 4, 7, 8]). Therefore, such a strategy is not applicable to a small territory or even to a region, a city, a province. Such attempts are a real sham. Perhaps neglecting numerous limitations, risks and threats we could invent such a strategy, but our neighbours and laws of nature itself would not let us implement it.

Analysis of some of the numerous ‘strategies’ proposed by now shows that they come down simply to compliance with bureaucratic procedure of recording and reporting in the framework of the developed “administrative market” (see [9]).

So, one of the major methodological imperatives is that a concept (and thus a strategy) of sustainable development cannot be built at limited scale. But what scale do we need to overcome this restriction? Nobody really knows although it is hypothetically supposed that a continental (Europe, South America) or state scale (if a state is big enough like China, Russia, USA), under certain conditions allow to create a ‘limited’ strategy of sustainable development (which is recorded in [1, 2, 7, 8, 10, 11]). But why?

***Conditions for sustainable development.*** Building and implementation of a concept for sustainable development need:

- (a) corresponding – global – volume of resources;
- (b) powerful human capacity;
- (c) social capacity;
- (d) economy capable of self-reliant development;
- (e) political system that has a potential of self-sufficiency.

Perhaps Russia is a country that responds most closely to those criteria. In this regard I will cite academician V.A. Koptug, one of the founding fathers of the “third iteration” concept of sustainable development, who said in his lecture in Novosibirsk University: “*I have always thought that there no country on Earth is closer than Russia to the possibility of realizing the concept of sustainable development due to its resources, capacities and intellectual potential*”

[8, p.14].

Therefore the situation of, say, modern Russia fully allows to build and implement a concept of moving towards sustainable development, and this is recorded in the very first official act about the creation of a concept of moving towards sustainable development [1]. But regional and certainly intraregional level do not allow this. A “concept of sustainable development for Karelian republic” or for “Baltic region” can neither be built, nor (strategically) be implemented, no matter how much the obviously inexpert local officials want it, or how hard the unscrupulous scientists convince them that it is possible.

But we can and should discuss other things related to this question, namely the methodological aspects of the concept of sustainable development, which even now allows to create local points of crystallization and expected rise – expected moving towards sustainable development.

Therefore instead of trying to create regional concepts we should talk about building a strategy of moving towards sustainable development, and not about the strategy of sustainable development itself. This is the first goal. But it requires setting the second one, which is to define a probability range and a tolerance range for the concept of sustainable development, i.e. to define and identify conditions and threats, risks and limitations.

**Limitations.** The first goal in development of such strategy is determined by following conditions and limitations (briefly but explicitly formulated as early as in 1987 in the Brundtland Report [4]). Formal limitations for a concept and a realistic strategy of sustainable development lie in the well-known modern processes leading away from and not towards sustainable development:

1. contradiction between the models of economic growth predominant in contemporary world and the ideas of sustainable development; as we know, “*sustainable development is such a development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs*” [4, p. 50];
2. a concept of sustainable development “...*implies certain limitations in exploitation of natural resources*” [4, p. 24], which positively implies a strategy and practice of natural resource management strongly different from what we have now;
3. social and economic inequality between different countries and different population sections, first of all the poverty of a substantial part of the population and unequal access to the natural resources (“*Conditions required for satisfaction of the basic needs include not only the economic growth of new era for all the countries, most part of which are poor, but also a guarantee that the poor countries will receive their share of resources necessary to maintain this growth*”. [4, p.25]).

Thus the models of economic activity and corresponding models of economic development (“growth models”) existing everywhere in the world do not meet the requirements of sustainable development, in the first instance because of the extractive and destructive, instead of low-impact and recreational, way of using natural resources.

Such economy paradigm is linked to an inherent to the Modern era “economy-centric” view on drastic social and political changes in modern world, which are explained within the framework of economic determinism of social processes, which affects the corresponding national programs or strategies (e.g., [3]). Therefore when building a concept it is necessary to provide for the differentiation between social and economic planning. In such a case highlighting social issues as opposed to economic ones allows to avoid a threat which is common for all the contemporary national concepts of development programs (social by definition) – this of non-realistic expectations concerning substantial financial investments, necessary for a successful realization of a project of any national strategy, in consequence of which the programs become merely recommendatory, but generally can not be realized.

***Alternative scenarios for the development of modern societies along the path of sustainable development.*** Technically there are at least two alternative strategies of moving towards the sustainable development:

1. In the first case where a society (or societies) receives external resources beyond what is necessary for its existence, it is possible to form a strategy of moving towards the sustainable development with priority of economic factors over social ones, since nearly all such societies have an institution of ‘distributive state’ (in the terminology of D. North and his co-authors), i.e. they are social welfare states with an impersonal government and anonymous right to violence. But this strategy is relevant for only a few societies (so called modern industrially developed countries), although it is this strategy that is mostly implied by both politicians and scientists when they start to discuss the issue of sustainable development (see: [2, 3, 7]).
2. In the second case the strategy is built with the focus on the use of the society’s internal resources. This means the actualization of not only material and financial but also non-material, i.e. spiritual, human, social, political resources. And this is the most important thing (see [5, 7, 8, 12]). As soon as we shift focus to the use of internal resources of the society itself, intellectual values take priority over material ones. Still this second direction of sustainable development strategy remains unfamiliar to strategy developers. Meanwhile, judging from the environmental prognosis, most societies will be forced to accept this second, alternative strategy, where the immaterial drivers prevail over material (economic) ones.

***Insurmountable risks on the way of constructing the concept of sustainable development.***

So how should we build a concept of sustainable development at supra-regional level? It certainly must be focused on environmental issues and not on economical ones. The concept must:

(a) consider specific regional features, such as natural, ethnic and cultural, social and historical, as well as historically formed household patterns and practices, for they mostly determine the conditions and are the basic limitations for realization of the strategy;

(b) be universal enough so that in future it could whether be built into the nationwide concept of sustainable development or become a part of a family of similar regional concepts without a necessity of substantial changes; this is the way to avoid many risks.

The concept must initially allow for the finiteness of resources of any kind, – i.e. material, financial, organizational, administrative – available to the actors of the strategy of sustainable development (see on this subject esp. [4, 6, 7, 8, 12]).

When available information is limited, concept building as well as strategy development explicitly requires acquisition of systematic data about the population and the forms of its activities. Existing data, whether received from official sources or collected through scientific research, remain incomplete, fragmentary, inhomogeneous and incomparable by certain criteria [13]. Especially incomplete are the data concerning temporary social trends. But the main risks are caused by the principles of strategy of sustainable development themselves. The principles declared (see [4, 5]) are too different from those that we still follow in our contemporary “development”. A truly feasible strategy of sustainable development as it was intended by its founders and supporters, must be based on the following four principles:

1. Interaction and interdependence between social, economic and ecological development [4, p. 24-26].
2. Priority of non-material values over material ones ([7, pp. 64-76], also [1]).
3. Priority of collective interests over individual ones [7, 8].
4. Priority of governmental regulation over market power [1, 12].

Over more than 30 years that passed since the initiation of the idea of sustainable development, we got used to see the first principle, that of triadic unity, as something natural and necessary. But despite all the repetitive declarations, this, generally speaking, imperative has not yet been implemented by anyone anywhere. No interaction, and even less interdependence between social, economic and ecological development is observed anywhere in the world. The examples are at hand – the way of following the Kyoto Protocol regulations and the Fukushima

case are enough to realize that practically this principle is nothing more than a mantra for the governments of “developed countries”.

In spite of significant progress towards emphasizing of non-material values in Western societies, a number of studies by the group of R. Inglehart show that the real life proves the opposite: poverty and hardship make people care about their own stomach more than about freedom, and they even confess it. However, this has been predicted by F.M. Dostoyevsky, and over near two centuries nothing has changed: as before, the values of wellbeing and safety still dominate those of freedom, knowledge, and beauty [15], not only in Russia. The principle 4 (priority of collective over individual), as well as the priority of government regulation over market, now are seen as some rejected anachronisms rather than guidelines for the future.

Apparently only in case of crisis and war scientists and politicians everywhere begin to admit that libertarian views on the role of the state in the economic life of society do not have absolute priority and that the shift towards the mobilization economic management is not in any way a reversion to feudal past with no differentiation between political and economical (see esp. [16]), but our near, and perhaps our distant future.

Therefore, it must be admitted that in the existing circumstances principles of sustainable development strategy are not feasible. So, it is impossible to elaborate a strategy that would comply with those principles. There can be some substitutes based on the “adjusted” principles. And indeed, the very concept of sustainable development cannot be built and fully implemented in the declared way. The only thing possible, - as long ago and repeatedly claimed by V.A. Koptuyug (see [8]) in his “Concept of shifting towards...” ([1], also [6, 7]), - is some kind of more or less steady *movement towards sustainable development*. But it is not the same that the strategy of sustainable development itself, since such a revolutionary shift in the global economy as a change of principles of development that we got accustomed to during the last 200-300 years will be exactly what is called “the end of the familiar world” [17].

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